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An Industry Perspective on Fire Control

No single element has been more crucial to the development of industrial forest management than the prevention and suppression of wildfire. For Weyerhaeuser, an industrial forestland owner since 1900, success in forestry depends directly on the company's ability to defend against fire across 5.6 million acres of forestland in the Pacific Northwest and southern states.

An essential part of Weyerhaeuser's fire protection strategy involves cooperation with neighboring state and federal forest managers and other private landowners. The company shares fire protection plans and surveillance data gathered from airplanes, helicopters, and ground- and tower-based spotters. Irrespective of geographic differences, Weyerhaeuser's fire prevention and control strategy is much the same in the Northwest as it is in the mid-South and southeastern states.

For example, on Weyerhaeuser's 600,000-acre tree farm near Klamath Falls, Oregon, 1994's perilously dry summer provided constant action for company and state firefighters. According to timberlands manager, Martin Lugas, the tree farm averages 90 to 100 fires per year. Fortunately, most are contained to less than a quarter-acre; although each year an average of one 50- to 1,000-acre fire occurs. An arson fire earlier this year blackened more than 900 acres at Klamath Falls—an unusual and disturbing occurrence in this region.

Lugas describes the elements of Weyerhaeuser's multi-pronged fire protection approach:

Infrastructure. Weyerhaeuser has built an extensive forest road network throughout its ownership. Even inactive roads can be opened quickly if the company needs to get vehicles onto them. The roads make tree farms accessible to personnel, bulldozers, and trucks and also serve as effective fire breaks.

Prevention. Prevention figures heavily in the company's operating procedures during both peak and nonpeak fire seasons. Precautions include:

- equipping all vehicles with two-way radios;
- hiring contract fire watchers to patrol harvest sites at the end of each workday to report or extinguish any spot fires; and

- shutting down in-woods operations at 1:00 pm during peak fire season and closing tree farms to the public.

Resources. During fire season, Weyerhaeuser stations fire wardens and crews on round-the-clock alert. Each operating region also has its own fire fighting equipment; well-maintained and fully prepared tankers, pumpers, and bulldozers comprise the basic arsenal at each Weyerhaeuser tree farm. Bulldozers provide the primary means for containing outbreaks, clearing fire trails, and boxing small blazes against roads, clearings, or drainages. Additionally, foresters and contractors carry hand tools and extinguishers in their vehicles and, in some cases, as part of their personal gear.

In support of the ground forces, Weyerhaeuser owns 10 helicopters. During peak fire season, they can be airborne within 5 to 10 minutes. Aerial water-drops released from the aircraft help prevent spot fires from leaping ahead of the main conflagration, which buys valuable time for on-the-ground crews.

Suppression. In Oregon, all forest landowners pay a per-acre assessment to the State Department of Forestry for fire protection. But the company's foresters and contractors are trained to provide first-response measures until state crews can mobilize and reach the fire site.

Silviculture. Weyerhaeuser personnel work aggressively to maintain healthy stands. That includes keeping forests well thinned, rapidly salvaging diseased and dying wood, and preventing the understory from becoming overstocked and thus prone to insect infestations.

The reward for these combined efforts is that Weyerhaeuser has lowered its average fire losses to a point where its forestlands are self-insured. In addition, the company is able to continue safe operations virtually year-round. Says Lugas, "By taking proper precautions, we can log right through some of the driest years on record, including this one."

Contributed by Jim Schott, Weyerhaeuser Company, Tacoma, WA 98477.